LIFELONG LEARNING, THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY, AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

There is increasing rhetoric surrounding the concepts of lifelong learning and the knowledge economy (Peters, 2001); specifically e-learning and web-based learning environments. This paper seeks to explore the journeys of two professionals from two separate disciplines and work environments located in one higher-education institution where there is an increasing push to develop learning materials using online and other e-learning technologies.

With the steady shift from traditional learning, online learning is now playing an integral part of course delivery at the Australian regional university where the authors work. A contextual analysis of online learning within the broader views of the institution provides examples of discourses relating to online environments, knowledge management, and the professional development of the participants.

This discussion draws on the concepts of lifelong learning (Crowley, 2002; Serim & Murray, 2003) and embeds them within an online learning environment. Exploration of the multiple workplace environments within the institution under review demonstrates one way in which educators can embrace and position themselves as they negotiate changing educational discourses.

INTRODUCTION

It has almost become redundant to argue that we are living in a global environment that is changing rapidly (Lankshear, Gee, Knobel, & Searle, 1997). New times and new learners are linked closely to the technological and information explosions (Green & Bigum, 1993; Kincheloe, 1998; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998; Buckingham, 2000; Walker-Gibbs, 2001, 2003). Arguably, a significant challenge facing the various educational sectors is that it is becoming necessary for more people from the general population to know how to manage, access, use, and manipulate information and knowledge in a variety of contexts. As Mackay, Maples, and Reynolds (2001) argued, a definition of the information society is that it is,
… a loose umbrella term, used by various authors and commentators to refer to far-reaching social change that is underway. It encompasses a diversity of arguments, which all see information, and information technology, as somehow lying at the heart of the emerging social order. Greater volumes of information are being communicated by a fast-growing range of technologies with profound social consequences. (p. 1)

This paper outlines how two individuals negotiated the complexities of the various discourses and demands from a variety of sectors and contexts including the global shift to the knowledge/information society, the different higher-education divisions in which the authors’ work, and the specific context of online learning. The following section of the paper outlines the global context that is impacting on the authors’ institution generally and their workplace specifically.

GLOBAL CONTEXT OF LIFELONG LEARNING

As Morris (2000) stated: “Success in school, the workplace and everyday life now depends on knowing how to access and use information. Knowledge workers have been second only to management workers as the fastest growing occupation since the early 1970s” (p. 29). There is also increasing rhetoric in the research that links the global changes to the concepts of work and lifelong learning. As the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2000) posit,

… it is indeed the changing nature of work that now makes lifelong learning… so imperative. It is … expected that there will be a strong, and potentially unsatisfied, demand for highly skilled professional, technical, administrative and managerial staff …. The demands of this new knowledge economy mean that qualifications are becoming obsolete more quickly than ever. (p. 19)

For us, lifelong learning is about continually developing relationships, partnerships, and knowledge. It is also about engagement with new ideas and new technologies. On a more specific level, it is about personal and professional fulfilment, taking advantage of opportunities to learn, and making lifelong connections with our learning whilst continually engaging in reflective practices. From a global perspective we acknowledge that the move to online learning, combined with the information explosion, has meant that the way in which we manage knowledge also has to change.

As both authors work in the multimedia fields of development and education, our specific focus in this paper is on how information communication technologies (ICTs) can help to transform education. As Goodson, Knobel, Lankshear, & Mangan (2002), stated, “As we enter the twenty-first century, the familiar spaces of formal education are increasingly being invaded and transformed by new information and communication technologies (ICTs)” (p. 1). The changing nature of the world and access and availability of ICTs means that we have to acknowledge the changing nature of work (Mackay, Maples, & Reynolds, 2001) and the potential impact this will have on the more traditional educational structures and skills of the workplace.

Perceptions of being on the “cutting edge” of educational innovation are currently associated with computer use and the notion of the “smart” lecture hall where educational experiences are technologised experiences. We need to be aware that discourses around effective teaching emphasise, among other things, student satisfaction, retention, and flexibility, with many of the outcomes linked unproblematically to the use of technology. As Crowley (2002) argued,

E-learning encompasses training, education, information, communication, collaboration, knowledge management and performance management. It addresses business issues such as reducing costs, providing greater access to information and accountability for learning and increasing employee competence and competitive agility. (p. 58)

The next section of this paper outlines this local context and the specifics of implementing an online course for the Education Faculty of one university which is taking these global ideas on board. The impact on the authors’ work will also be discussed.
LOCAL CONTEXT OF LIFELONG LEARNING

As already stated, the two authors of this paper work in two different divisions of a regional, Queensland university. The university is rapidly expanding to what could be described as a “global” university with campuses situated locally, intrastate, interstate and internationally. In the context of a changing information society it could be argued that this university has moved from a teacher-centred to a “student/consumer” focus (Baillie & Moxham, 1998) where there is a requirement for academics to be computer literate (Ling & Ling, 1998).

As part of the knowledge economy, information society, technology explosion and “new work order”, who will be responsible for ensuring that education responds to the challenges posed by these phenomena is a question that must be asked. As Goodson, Knobel, Lankshear, & Mangan (2002), stated,

The logic of the new work order is that the roles and responsibilities of the middle will pass to the ‘front-line workers’ themselves (formerly the bottom of the hierarchy). Workers will be transformed into committed ‘partners’ who engage in meaningful work, fully understand and control their jobs, supervise themselves and actively seek to improve their performance through communicating clearly their knowledge and needs. (p. 85)

The position of “front-line workers” charged with being responsible for supporting and managing the transformation of teaching and learning from face-to-face to online is where the authors found themselves at the beginning of 2003. We turn firstly to the broader context of the university in which the first author (Julie) is situated.

Julie has a Bachelor of Multimedia, and a Postgraduate Certificate in Online Learning. It is the combination of these qualifications that allows Julie to support online curriculum design. Titled a Multimedia Producer, Julie maintains a currency of knowledge in new software, technologies, and educational trends to support academic teaching efforts within the university. She produces models for the design and development of online educational material, particularly within an online environment, and works hand-in-hand with academic staff to ensure educational practices best fit the types of modalities offered at the university.

The second author, (Bernadette) is a lecturer in the Faculty of Education and Creative Arts of this regional university and is responsible for two courses entitled e-learning Manager and The Entrepreneurial Professional that are part of the new education degree developed at this institution; namely the Bachelor of Learning Management. The course The Entrepreneurial Professional engages with the idea that “Using various approaches to future studies, students in this course will learn to identify, analyse, research and respond to contemporary organisational concerns in ways that demonstrate, also, an appreciation of future and possible developments of entrepreneurial discourses” (Faculty of Education & Creative Arts, 2003b). The links between the course, the teaching program, the schools, and the university and faculty were based on notions of future, directed, lifelong learning which responds to the global changes discussed earlier in the paper.

Drawing on our different experiences we have worked together to build up a contextual framework around developing these courses online. One of the first differences between the two authors to become apparent was that Julie, as a multimedia producer, is classified as a General staff member of the university, whilst Bernadette is classified as an Academic staff member. In recognition of the fact that within the information society and the new knowledge economy, no one person is able to be “the holder of all knowledge” it was essential for the two authors to enter into a continually negotiated partnership that positioned them as facilitators of learning. This is particularly important when a General staff member can be seen as holding a mostly administrative and supporting role in the process whilst the Academic staff member is seen as the facilitator of the teaching and learning.

Whilst we have diverse backgrounds, experiences, knowledge, and directives, our collaboration had at the core the common goal of helping Education students enrolled in these courses to experience effective online teaching and learning. We needed to view the partnership as an opportunity to begin breaking down some of the more traditional roles and move towards a
supportive partnership where both parties were responsible for developing and researching the best way of implementing these courses online.

There is much to be done in forging strong collaboration between academic and general staff. We tend to work in silos, whereas we should all work together. We need strategic plans, processes, and systems that support proactive, innovative, and effective practices; which in turn assist the teaching and learning processes through strengthening collaboration and coordination between academic and general staff via teamwork. The next section of this paper focuses on the course The Entrepreneurial Professional to illustrate how the authors went about trying to begin to achieve this goal.

THE ENTREPRENEURIAL PROFESSIONAL AND ONLINE LEARNING

The implementation of The Entrepreneurial Professional needed to complement the student internship (practicum teaching component). Because of the nature of these internships, students are not required to attend face-to-face lectures or tutorials. This course was developed through the learning management system, Blackboard, which is new to the university. The course was developed as part of pilot project for second semester, 2003 delivery. Our aims were to encourage and facilitate collaborative learning without an information overload. It was anticipated that the course, The Entrepreneurial Professional, would be developed using a systematic ADDIE (analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation) instructional-design model (Kruse, 2002). This was to ensure an authentic online learning environment as suggested by Herrington, Oliver, & Reeves (2003) who argued,

Instead of providing academic, decontextualised exercises that can be used primarily to practice a skill, there are many instances of courses where authentic tasks create the core of the online learning environment, and the completion of the tasks effectively comprises the entire student commitment for the course. (p. 59)

From the perspective of “authentic” online learning environments applied in this course, we delineated the following characteristics to be important,

- to provide opportunities to engage with students from different backgrounds,
- to collaborate and be able to learn from others but also examine others from a different perspective,
- to reflect on practice which will enable choices and decisions,
- to integrate life experiences into practice,
- to be able to sustain lifelong learning both individually and socially.

O’Reilley (2000) argued that there is a need to humanise online learning experiences by providing greater compassion, empathy, and a sense of open-mindedness. This is critical to the success of any new online learning environment with which our students engage. Support by way of tutor-lead facilitation should be provided in the initial stages of the course, which will enable students to feel comfortable and at ease. O’Reilley (2000) noted that “the learners engagement is paramount to their learning success.”

Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, & Turoff (1995) suggested that the essentials required before making a commitment to an online learning environment include,

- learner interest and support,
- educational activity would be enhanced by online modality, and
- management support and recognition. (p. 145)

In this phase, information had been gathered about the target audience, selection of the appropriate technologies, identification of learning styles, and discussion of the aims with the subject matter expert. We discussed demographics, motivation for learning, and content knowledge, all of which assisted in developing this course to meet the intended aims and objectives.

The course engaged with the challenging, professional, online environment within which

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1 It should be noted that all courses within the Faculty’s suite of learning management programs are delivered face-to-face. In the past some lecturers have provided supplementary material via online means such as websites or WebCT. This being the case, students have not necessarily been exposed to a fully online learning environment.
educators now work – with the focus on the skills necessary to position oneself as a leader in educational settings. Using various approaches, students would identify, analyse, research, and respond to contemporary educational organizational concerns in ways that demonstrate and appreciate the future of entrepreneurial discourses.

As Barker (2002) has pointed out, “Online tutors need to have a range of different technical and communication skills” (p. 7). It wasn’t enough for us to determine what the students needs were; what we also had to ensure was that Bernadette’s technical skills were sufficient for her to become an effective facilitator.

The next section of this paper discusses the fact that although there is increasing rhetoric about the need to move to a more global online environment, there are reasons for resistance to this change; with this resistance not only being to online learning but also to the underlying push to lifelong learning that is facilitating the perceived need for this change. At the same time we argue that there are also opportunities that should be considered that can help educators face the challenges head on.

RESISTANCE TO, AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR, LIFELONG LEARNING

What needs to be explicitly stated is that although there are rapid changes to the way we envisage learning taking place outside higher-education institutions, the same cannot be said for the inside of higher-education structures. As McCredie (2003) argued,

Learning is a universal activity that is ripe for … strategic transformation …. The two main reasons this has not yet happened are probably (1) envisioning and then implementing innovative interactive learning environments that really work is clearly difficult to do, and (2) educational institutions resist change very effectively. (p. 20)

One of the reasons for this resistance is increasing workloads and decreasing funding in the Australian higher-education sector (Moore, 2003). Despite the fact that individuals understand the importance of embracing new technologies, as Lankshear, Snyder, & Green (2000) argued,

Unfortunately, the incursion of new technologies into our educational lives coincides, by no means accidentally, with other things. These include an intensification of teachers’ work, concerted attacks on teachers’ conditions, and the openness with which interested groups conspire to undermine confidence in public schools by manufacturing successive ‘crises’ in school performance. (p xiv)

The development of this online course was an additional part of the authors’ workload. For example, whilst developing the materials for this course Bernadette was also teaching the course face-to-face intensively with a separate cohort of students. As Ayers & Grisham (2003) have posited,

“… the computer does not replace other work; it only adds to it. Whatever the network efficiencies we can gain in other aspects of the institutional operations, the introduction of IT into the classroom seems to soak up money and time rather than save them” (p. 45).

The increased workload was also due in part to the implementation within the faculty of a new degree that was devised to be “futures oriented” that was occurring at the same time, and therefore there was little time or opportunity to engage in sufficient staff development. As Bennett & Marsh (2002) argued, “The implementation of … (ICT) represents a significant challenge for all education institutions and teaching professionals and no one would question the need for effective programmes of staff development and training to support this significant culture change” (p. 14).

Although in this instance Bernadette’s skills were such that she was able to meet the technical demands of implementing this course online, this is not always the case with other staff in similar situations. As Coaldrake & Stedman, (1999) quite rightly point out, “At the individual level, within our universities there is great variation in skills and attitudes towards technology” (p. 6). It could be argued that the resistance to engage with online learning is also linked to the limited technical skills of the generalist educator.
Despite these significant barriers and points of resistance it should also be recognised that the embracing of change, and effective, futures-oriented, teaching practice also presents the educator and students with numerous opportunities. As Barker (2002) stated,

“… in the majority of situations, using e-learning technologies implies that it is possible to provide more widespread access to education for larger groups of people. This, in turn, is likely to mean that ‘consumers’ will have a wide range of abilities and prior experience” (p. 3).

What this means is that by providing an effective online teaching and learning environment we are equipping students with the technical and attitudinal skills that will help them participate more fully in a global knowledge economy (Crowley, 2002; Morris, 2000). This in turn opens up opportunities for students to engage with learning in a lifelong perspective. As Morris (2000) argued, lifelong learning is desirable in order to,

… ensure all individuals have the opportunity to participate in society to the fullest extent. Those who do not build good learning foundations or miss continuous learning opportunities risk exclusion. Without an increased emphasis on lifelong learning, the earnings gap between levels of educational attainment may continue to widen. (p. 29)

As educators our goal is always to facilitate learning for as many students as possible. Online learning, structured effectively and creatively, can provide opportunities for us to achieve these goals. As Thompson & Randall (2001) stated,

In order for it to deliver on its promises, e-learning needs to be carefully crafted, of high quality and expertly executed. It needs to tap the very highest practitioners of conventional teaching and learning. Its success will also hinge on the ability of teachers to maximize the web’s potential. And, last but not least, it will need risk taking educationalists prepared to experiment with new teaching methods – and at times fail while trying – in the search for the method(s) which will deliver. (p. 291)

The opportunity to take risks and engage in supportive networks and partnerships can help educators maximise online teaching and learning potential.

CONCLUSION

This paper sought to illustrate a particular journey of two people whose goal was to provide an effective online learning environment to a particular group of students. Along the way the two participants had to navigate their way through the various institutional and knowledge-economy discourses. By engaging in a supportive partnership that transcended traditional structures the participants were able to enhance their professional development, with this succeeding in making inroads into their personal lifelong journeys.

REFERENCES


